The Stigma of Seeing a Psychiatrist

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By Arnold A. Hutschnecker

"If one thing was made perfectly clear in this first slow, polite day of Senate Committee hearings on the nomination of Representative Gerald R. Ford to be Vice President, it is that consulting a psychiatrist or psychotherapist is still an unforgivable sin for an American politician." Thus wrote Linda Charlton in The New York Times.

On that first polite day before the Senate Rules Committee, Gerald Ford denied that he had ever been a patient of mine and said with emphasis: "Under no circumstances did I see him (Dr. Hutschnecker) for treatment and under no circumstances have I ever been treated by any psychiatrist."

When questioned by the committee's chairman, Senator Cannon of Nevada, about the purpose of his brief visit to my office on Nov. 21, 1966, Mr. Ford replied that he had dropped in to "say hello" and as to the conversation, "Dr. Hutschnecker gave me a lecture on leadership or about the role of leadership in the American political system."

On Nov. 7 I appeared before the United States Senate committee in Washington as a sworn witness. Asked by the various Senators what my relationship with the Vice President-designate had been, I confirmed Mr. Ford's statement that he had never been a patient of mine and had come to my office only once. As to the personality of the former lobbyist who had charged Mr. Ford had been a patient of mine for about a year, I stated in the closed session the abhorrence I had felt at what seemed to be a deliberate attempt to destroy another man (Mr. Ford) politically.

In a book he wrote, the ex-lobbyist made statements so obviously perfidious that the chairman wondered whether this man lied deliberately or whether he did not know the difference between reality and fantasy. Why was the ex-lobbyist lying?

I gave my answer in the following way: Schopenhauer, the German philosopher, talked about two types of writers, one who writes out of conviction and the other who writes for money. There is a third type of writer, I said, one who writes out of vengeance.

"I did not sue the man," I answered the chairman because I did not want him to gain any benefit from his misdeed through publicity. A megalomaniac has little difficulty saying anything that comes to mind and will suit his purpose. According to the newspaper reports, the committee, after having heard the ex-lobbyist, believed that there were grounds for the Department of Justice to examine the possibility of perjury.

What gave this case however special significance is not whether Gerald Ford had seen me professionally—he did not—but the fact that an alleged psychotherapeutic treatment could become a national issue, partially holding up the confirmation of Mr. Ford. I found this point so disturbing that I did not wish it to be pushed into a dark corner and then forgotten.

In 1968, when the late Drew Pearson, a syndicated columnist, made a similar though more devastating allegation, that President Nixon had been a former patient of mine, I was forced also to correct falsities which were of greater gravity. But the element of superstition was similar, as evidenced by the strong advice Mr. Nixon was given that it would be unwise for him as a political leader to continue to visit a physician who was changing his practice from internal medicine to a psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapy.

This point was made again by the crisis of Thomas Eagleton, who first won and then lost the Vice Presidential nomination on grounds of having had three psychiatric hospitalizations. I refuted then, the idea that a neurotic man could not be a great leader.

In this last third of our century, when man has demonstrated that he can land on the moon and return safely, when scientific knowledge is available to study human behavior and when emotional reactions in our human intercourse, be they positive or negative, can be interpreted with a fair amount of accuracy, can we continue to treat the psychoanalytic field and its application to political leaders as a dread-inspiring tabu?

To consider a branch of medical knowledge and practice with suspicion or condemnation is not merely an act of cruelty toward people in need, it is almost an act of negligence for a Government not to avail itself of the merits of this discipline.

The Ford and Nixon cases prove that for politicians of their stature it would be a kiss of death, had they sought help for the stress of their burdensome office by an analyst. But doctors who have conquered most of the plagues and thereby dispersed medieval superstition, now question, as research goes on, whether the time has not come to liberalize our hangover in time and spirit from the era when witches were burned and the "devil" beaten out of unhappy people.

Most doctors, and certainly those in the field of psychoanalytically oriented psychology, reject dogmatism and intolerance.

To accomplish a new way of thinking, I move toward new discipline—that of psychopolitics, a study of the effect the psychological make-up of political leaders is having on the political life and the present events of a nation. Let us imagine, for instance, what torture and misery would have been spared a man like Woodrow Wilson and the world if he could have had competent psychiatric help before slipping into the darkness of his depression.

Or, if a towering figure of Abraham Lincoln could have been helped to understand the nature of the anguish produced by his inner conflicts. It would not have diminished his greatness and perhaps there would not have been any need for the bloody killings of the Civil War.

General Pershing had a psychiatrist on his staff. I cannot help think if an American President had a staff psychiatrist, perhaps a case such as Watergate might not have had a chance to develop.

A President has a personal physician to watch over his physical health. Why could a man of outstanding lead-

ership not have a physician watching over his and his staff's mental health? Why should that be considered unacceptable and be interpreted as signifying mental instability or incompetence? And why must a leader in our time carry the enormous stress of his office without the benefit of physicians, experienced in objective interpretation of problems or of curing possibly debilitatory reactions if they occur, as was the case with Wilson and Lincoln?

The help a political leader might seek under stress to secure his emotional stability is not weakness but courage and is as much in our national interest as it is in his. Why condemn any such attempt as an unforgivable sin?

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